

Media coverage influences value of presidential debates for viewers, study finds

September 24 2012, by Jeff Grabmeier

The presidential debates offer viewers a lot of substance about the issues of the campaign—but postdebate media coverage can undermine the value they have for voters, a new study suggests.

Results showed that postdebate coverage that focused on the debate as a competition led viewers to think less about policy issues. By comparison, coverage that focused on the substance of the discussion increased the likelihood that viewers would come away with specific thoughts about candidates' [policy proposals](#).

The researchers conducted two different studies in which young Americans viewed actual clips from the 2004 and 2008 [presidential debates](#) and then read [media coverage](#) of the debate.

Afterward, the researchers asked the viewers to describe the debate as they would to a friend. From these descriptions, the researchers were able to tell how the media coverage affected what viewers chose to focus on in reflecting back on the debates.

"With the level of substance in the debates, there is some hope that this could be a positive moment in which people really engage in the important questions of policy," said Ray Pingree, lead author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

But whether viewers actually did that depended a lot on the media coverage.

"The media have a strong influence on whether viewers think of the debate in terms of a discussion of the issues or simply as a competition between the candidates," he said.

"We need the media to treat the content of the debates more seriously. Viewers want to hear how their vote choice connects to real problems facing the nation and they want help from the media in figuring out which policies will actually be more likely to solve problems. There will be other times for the media to focus on who won or who looked better."

Pingree conducted the study with Andrea Quenette, a graduate student at Ohio State, and Rosanne Scholl of Louisiana State University. Their results appear in the current issue of the *Journal of Communication*.

A key issue in this study is how the media "frame" the presidential debates, Pingree said: in other words, how the media describe the debate as far as its importance to viewers.

A "game frame" is one in which the media approach the debates as a sporting event: They discuss who won the debate, who looked best, and who appealed to certain key blocs of voters. A "policy frame" is one in which the media discuss the issues, such as which candidate supported certain policies and the reasons he gave for that support.

The first study took place in the two weeks prior to the 2004 election, and involved 698 college students.

All the students were exposed to a five-minute segment of the first presidential debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry. One group read no media coverage afterward. The other two groups read different versions of a 400-word postdebate news article about the segment, written specifically for the study.

The two articles were nearly identical, except for the framing. In the policy frame, the article emphasized the candidates' different positions on the issues. In the game frame, the article emphasized candidate performance and character issues.

After watching the debate and reading the articles, the participants were asked to write out, in detail, how they would discuss the debate clip with a friend.

The researchers were looking to see how many policy reasons the viewers included in their descriptions. Policy reasons were defined as statements for or against a current or proposed government action, with reasons for supporting or opposing the policy.

For example, simply saying "I would like more tax cuts" is not a policy reason. However, saying "I would like more tax cuts to stimulate the economy" would qualify as a policy reason.

In this study, the media coverage had a strong effect on whether the viewers engaged in this policy reasoning.

Even though they all were exposed to the same clip, [viewers](#) who read the media article with the game frame—emphasizing who won the debate—listed the fewest policy reasons in their description of the debate.

Those who read the article with the policy frame listed the most policy reasons. Those who didn't read any coverage fell in the middle.

"Even though all the participants were exposed to the same clip of the debate, they took away very different messages depending on the media coverage," Pingree said. "Postdebate coverage that uses the game frame undermines the ability of debates to get citizens reasoning about

politics."

A second study involved 1,207 students from three universities, two in the Midwest and one in the South. In this case, the participants watched a six-minute video from the first presidential debate between Barack Obama and John McCain in 2008. Then, just as in the first study, they read an article about the debate clip they had watched, different only in how it framed the debate.

As in the first study, participants who read the article with the policy frame were more likely to spontaneously come up with policy reasons compared to those who read the game-framed article.

"We did two studies in two different elections and got the same basic results—people are influenced by the media coverage of the debates," he said.

Pingree said it may be relatively easy for people to be influenced by media framing of the presidential debates because framing is often invisible to us.

"If we think someone is trying to change our mind about something, our alarm bells go off and we resist the influence. But we don't often notice framing by the media, because we have our own thoughts related to both frames," Pingree said.

"Most people can think about political issues either as a game or as a substantive discussion of how best to solve a problem. What the media are doing is simply drawing our attention to whatever thoughts we already have about the game aspect - which is the aspect of politics that is not as valuable to democracy."

Provided by Ohio State University

Citation: Media coverage influences value of presidential debates for viewers, study finds (2012, September 24) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-media-coverage-presidential-debates-viewers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.